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ABSTRACT

This paper presents advice on what questions to ask and what points to consider when purchasing classroom furniture. The suggested questions help purchasers determine how safe and appropriate the furniture is for a particular age group. The paper also provides easy-to-use references that cover planning a furniture purchase, making the actual purchase, and choosing a furniture vendor. (GR)

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Tables, shelves, chairs, and easels. These are the staples of an early childhood classroom, and yet their proper selection is often taken for granted. There are many guides, articles, and books about choosing toys and materials for early childhood environments, but not a lot of guidance on what to look for when purchasing or evaluating furniture needs.

Mike Sigsbee, owner of School Solutions, Inc., confirms that there are many questions to ask and points to consider before making a furniture purchase. Sigsbee states that safety should always be the first consideration in purchasing furniture or evaluating existing equipment. Next, ensure the item is appropriate for the age group it is intended. The rest of this article provides an easy-to-use reference that covers the planning of a furniture purchase to making the actual purchase. Lastly, a list of issues to consider when choosing a furniture vendor is included.

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Questions to Answer When Planning Your Furniture Purchase

- Who is going to be using the furniture? The age of the children using the furniture dictates the size of the piece.

- What is the purpose of the furniture piece? For example, a table intended for dramatic play has different requirements than a table used for meals and art projects.

- What state licensing requirements effect this purchase? Some states specify the size of the chair for each age group.

- How long do you expect to use the item; is it for long or short

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term use? Typically, furniture is for long term use, therefore quality and durability are of utmost importance.

• What overall "feel" are you interested in achieving? Do you want a homelike, school, or utilitarian look to the classroom?

• Does someone locally own the furniture you are interested in purchasing? It is helpful to see the piece in a classroom and ask how they like it, how it is holding up, and how responsive the vendor was to their needs.

• How flexible or easy-to-move does the furniture piece need to be? Some classrooms share space and need to move shelves daily; this makes its ability to be moved easily of primary importance.

Considerations to Make When Purchasing Children's Furniture or Evaluating Existing Pieces

• The furniture piece does not present any obstacles for children with special needs.

• There are no sharp edges or rough surfaces.

• The dimensions of the furniture are appropriate for your use; consider the ages of the children using the item as well as the size of the classroom or area the piece will be placed. The item should not block an adult's ability to supervise any part of the classroom.

• Corners are rounded.

• Furniture is lacquered or has an acrylic urethane finish and is not painted. (Paint requires frequent maintenance to keep it looking nice.)

• Any part(s) of the item that come out or off (such as individual shelves, knobs, or attachments) should be examined for stability, safety, and the availability of parts for replacement.

• Small knobs or handles are securely fastened.

• Children cannot easily move the furniture by themselves.

• Joints (the place where the parts of a furniture piece are joined together) are well engineered; they are not simply stapled or nailed together. One of the best design features is called dowel-pinning construction. This type of construction features sections that are joined together using dowel pins, which strengthen the joints.

• The furniture will accept repeated sanitizing and does not

have a textured or porous surface that is difficult to clean.

• Ask the vendor what the warranty is and request it in writing.

• Ask the vendor if the item has to be assembled. A good clue to the difficulty level of a product's assembly is how many pieces the item comes in.

Additionally, Consider the Following When Purchasing or Evaluating These Specific Items:

Classroom Shelves

• The shelf unit has a wide base to prevent tipping over when pushed or climbed. This also means it doesn't have to be against a wall.

• There are no exposed nails or fasteners. Look for shelves and backing that is not stapled on, but fits into recessed grooves and glued.

• The unit is easily moved without falling apart or breaking at the bottom.

• If the shelf unit is on wheels, these lock securely.

• The size of the shelf is appropriate. Typically, the smaller shelf units are appropriate for infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds, and the larger shelf units are for preschoolers and older children.

Tables

• The size of the table is appropriate for the age of the child using it.

• The size of the table is appropriate for the size of chairs that will be used. For example, some tables are not short enough to comfortably accommodate 7 1/2 inch chairs.

• The tables have legs that adjust the height of the table, so that the table can be used with other age groups.

• The table legs come off the table top and can be purchased separately as replacement pieces.

• Consider the shape of the table that best fits your classroom. A round table takes up more classroom space and has more unused space in the middle than a rectangular table. A kidneyshaped table is more restrictive in use. Typically an adult

sits on one side with all the children on the other side.

• The table top surface is not textured or porous. Any surface that is not completely smooth is more difficult to get completely clean and sanitized.

• If there is colored trim around the table, be certain the colors will match the chairs and other furniture in the room. Most companies will send you paint chips of the different colors available.

Chairs

• The children's feet should be flat on the ground when sitting in the chair. Sigsbee suggests the following chair sizes:

• 7 1/2 inch for toddlers and two-year-olds

• 9 1/2 inch for three-year-olds

• 11 1/2 inch for four-year-olds

• 13 1/2 inch for five-year-olds and school-agers

• The chair surface is easily cleaned, and any laminate will hold up over time and continual cleaning with disinfectant.

• The feet of the chair (the bottom piece that rests on the floor) should have a nylon base instead of metal. Metal glides will eventually rust and stain the floor.

• The feet of the chair should be available to purchase separately and easily replaceable.

• If adults will be sitting in the children's chairs, check for the safe weight limit of the chair.

• The chairs will fit appropriately with the tables they are going to be used with.

Dramatic Play Furniture

• Furniture pieces with doors utilize full piano hinges (runs the length of the door) instead of doors with two or three smaller hinges. Piano hinges eliminate pinch points, a common problem with dramatic play refrigerators and cupboards.

• The doors on furniture pieces should have a 270 degree hinge. This type of hinge will allow the door to open three-quarters instead of half-way. This prolongs the life of the

door. Doors that open half way will be pushed by the children and will eventually break off.

• Doors that open side to side last longer than those that open up and down. A stove door that opens up and down will be stood on and sat on by the children compared to doors that open side to side.

• Consider a set of dramatic play furniture that connects with countertops that come off and on. This adds stability to these easy-to-tip-over pieces.

• Watch for pieces that come out easily such as, sink tubs, sink hoses, and interior shelves. Are they easy to put back in? Are they easily replaced?

• If the pieces will be used to store dramatic play accessories such as food and dishes, be certain there is adequate storage space within the furniture.

Vinyl Covered Furniture

• Vinyl must withstand repeated sanitizing without fading or discoloration.

• The inside foam should be sturdy and have a heavy density. An adult should be able to sit on the piece without causing the foam to indent very far.

• Ask for sample color swatches. Do not rely on catalogue pictures to match items to your existing color scheme.

• There are two different types of vinyl covered furniture, standard and expanded. The standard type of vinyl has a laminate to make it shiny and tear resistant. However, it has the possibility to delaminate and become an eyesore. The expanded vinyl does not have a laminate, but might tear. Carefully consider how much wear the piece will receive and consult with the manufacturer or your vendor on their recommendations for your situation.

• Pieces should be securely stitched together, zippered items are not safe for young children.

• The stitching should be tight, but not pulled so tightly that tiny holes are already visible.

Sand and Water Table

• The height of the table is appropriate for the ages of children using it.

- If the table will be used with different age groups, consider a table that has adjustable legs.

- If the table will be used or stored outside, look for tables that are not constructed of wood.

- The table should be easy for one adult to drain.

- The tub is easy to lift out and dump, preferably by one adult.

- Review the depth of the tub. The deeper the tub, the more likely the material is to stay in the tub.

- Anticipate how many children you expect to use the table at one time. This helps to determine how large a table you need.

Issues to Consider When Selecting a Furniture Vendor:

- Ask other programs for names and telephone numbers of reputable vendors they use.

- Vendors with local sales representatives are sometimes more attentive and responsive to your needs.

- Ask the vendor what the company's policies are for payments, replacements, or refunds.

- Ask the vendor what happens if an item arrives damaged; who pays any shipping and packaging costs?

- Speak with the local sales representative or manager about any discounts your program might be eligible to receive. Many vendors offer discounts for large or multiple purchases.

- Can the vendor refer you to a program that has already purchased the furniture piece you are interested in buying?

- Will the vendor send you a sample of the item for review and inspection before purchasing free of charge? Be certain to specify the terms of the sample before agreeing to anything being shipped. Can you keep the item? If you are required to return it after a period of time, who pays the shipping costs?

Angie Dorrell, M.A., is the director of curriculum for La Petite Academy, one of the nation's largest providers of early childhood education programs. She determines opening orders for many new schools and chooses preschool furniture to supplement existing classrooms. She also serves as a NAEYC accreditation validator and commissioner. Look for additional information at lapetite.com.

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